

VZCZCXRO0097

OO RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHAK #1029/01 1981221
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 171221Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0245
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001029

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/17/2019

TAGS: [CY](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#) [US](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: GOT RESOLUTE ON OPENING HALKI SEMINARY

REF: A. ISTANBUL 271

[B](#). ISTANBUL 261

[C](#). ANKARA 287

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY. The Turkish Government is signaling new resolve to reopen Halki Seminary and seems to be preparing public opinion for such a move, while cautioning that Ankara wants to avoid overturning constitutional provisions that mandate state control over all schools. The GOT is also delinking its long-term insistence for parallel steps in Greece's Thrace. The GOT has not yet included the Patriarch in these fresh discussions about a suitable formula for reopening, but plans to do so through the MFA, whose own views on the issue appear contradictory. END SUMMARY.

[2](#). (C) During a July 14 meeting, Prime Ministry advisor Nabi Avci told us that the GOT is determined to reopen Halki soon and is currently exploring the modalities of how that could be achieved. He said the GOT is no longer focused on a political "trade" for progress on the situation of ethnic Turks in Thrace (contrary to what the MFA has told us) but instead believes Ankara should take unilateral steps on Halki. Avci said the legal constraints remain formidable but are not, in his view, insurmountable. Foremost, he said, the GOT must ensure that reopening Halki does not produce a cascade of requests from other religious communities, including the Fethullah Gulen movement, to open their own educational institutions. This would create untold problems.

[3](#). (C) Deputy Prime Minister Cicek echoed these themes when he met with the Ambassador July 15. Cicek was remarkably forward-leaning on Halki (unlike when he met with Senator Durbin earlier this year, REF C), stating that "we need to find a status in order to open it." But Cicek cautioned that Article 24 of the Constitution mandates that all schools must be supervised by the state, including private and religious schools. If that were lifted, Turkey could turn into a "second Pakistan" and Al Qaeda could inject its doctrine into many schools' curriculums. Avci said that the GOT also wants to move carefully on Halki out of concern that reopening the seminary -- particularly if it results in a wave of Islamic schools -- could be interpreted as "anti-secular" activity that could prompt another closure case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

[4](#). (C) We pressed Avci on why the GOT seems newly energized on Halki. Avci contended that Prime Minister Erdogan has supported opening Halki "from the beginning." During a visit from the Patriarch three years ago, Erdogan had emphasized that he did not oppose the concept of re-establishing Halki, and that the Government was trying to overcome legal barriers. At that time, however, the YOK (Higher Education Council) President "was not thinking in parallel" with the GOT, Avci said. He had instead used the Halki issue against the AKP. In contrast, the current YOK President, Yusuf Ozcan, (installed by the AKP) favors a resolution of the issue. (NOTE: July 16 news reports quoted Ozcan as declaring

that Halki could open under YOK and that any special concerns, such as student attire, could be fixed with special provisions. END NOTE) Avci said Erdogan himself has strong views on religious freedom, which is why he is a proponent of opening Halki. When Erdogan was mayor of Istanbul, he had opened up a senior citizen center that included a mosque, chapel and synagogue although there were no Christians or Jews staying there.

15. (C) Avci said the GOT is discussing whether a Turkish-Greek University could be established, similar to private universities which now cooperate with Germany, France or the U.S. Such a university could have a number of separate departments (faculties) in addition to a seminary. The university could also be used to conduct joint research in the Aegean. Avci conceded that the GOT in the past has proposed opening up Halki as part of a university, and that the Patriarch has objected. He noted, mildly, that the Patriarch "keeps objecting to all our proposals and that annoys us."

16. (C) In a separate conversation July 13, Diyanet Vice President Mehmet Gormez said he too was optimistic about the opening of Halki, and suggested that the GOT is currently trying to prepare public opinion for such a move. He said the GOT's view is that Turkey should not look to other countries to meet the needs of its Christian citizens. For example, he asked rhetorically, why should an Armenian cleric have to go to Armenia for training? Similarly, Greek Orthodox clergy should be trained here in Turkey rather than in Greece. Gormez noted that several years ago the Diyanet had consulted with YOK on how to resolve the Halki issue.

ANKARA 00001029 002 OF 002

YOK had proposed separate Christian and Islamic theology faculties. However, although Islamic Theology faculties often employ non-Muslim professors, the Patriarchate had said it would be "unacceptable" to employ a Muslim scholar at Halki. The talks had run aground. Still, Gormez said, this is not a complicated issue and we should be able to overcome it. If the Patriarchate does not want any connection to a university, but instead wants simply to provide courses and seminars, this could be achieved without special arrangements, he commented.

17. (C) MFA Deputy Director Kerim Uras, who is responsible for Greece and Cyprus issues, has told us that Ankara is prepared to take steps on Halki without waiting for parallel actions by Athens to address grievances in Thrace. However, we have heard a starkly different message from both of Uras's superiors: Deputy Undersecretary Haydar Berk and Director General Berki Dibek. Berk has argued that "politically" Ankara could not afford to open up Halki without getting something in return "to show our citizens." Dibek is even more negative, declaring that reopening Halki would require "major" changes to the Constitution that could never win approval.

18. (C) COMMENT: Given the Patriarch's lament that no one has yet discussed any reopening formulas with him (REF A), we asked Avci if the GOT plans to bring the Patriarchate into the planning process. Avci said that this would certainly happen, and that typically this is a role for the MFA. Given the clear disconnect (and hostility) in the MFA over the Halki issue, this seems an unwise approach. If PM Erdogan has indeed resolved to move forward, it would be unfortunate if progress were to bog down in mixed signals from the GOT combined with an excessively rigid posture from the Patriarch on acceptable measures.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at
<http://www.intelink.gov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

JEFFREY